

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 August 2008

Indian university staff strike over unpaid salaries

On August 1, about 4,000 teachers and employees of Osmania University in Hyderabad in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh went on strike over unpaid salaries for July. The problem reportedly arose because the government stopped a block grant to university maintenance. A professor said that the government had informed the university that “after spending the Fixed Deposit Reserves, universities will be asked to find further resources themselves”. This was to be done by “initiating self-financing courses” and “collecting” high fees from the students.

Striking Osmania University Teachers’ Association members want the government to reinstitute the grants and end attempts to privatise university services. They resolved to continue strike action, which has shut down all departments and university hostels, until the issue is resolved.

In a separate dispute, health workers from the Peripheral Cancer Centre run by the Kidwai Memorial Cancer Hospital in Bangalore demonstrated in Gulbarga in the southern state of Karnataka on July 31. They were protesting over the non-payment of salaries for June and against the irregular payment of wages in general. They also opposed the withdrawal of other financial benefits and called for an increase in the Dearness Allowance.

Indian beedi workers demand pay rise

Beedi workers in Udupi, Karnataka held a sit-down protest on August 4 for a wage rise and other demands. Beedis are inexpensive cigarettes produced for local consumption.

Beedi and Tobacco Labor Union members want the piece-work payment increased from 66.03 rupees (\$US1.80) to 80 rupees for every 1,000 beedis and payment of Dearness Allowance arrears outstanding for the period of 1996 to 2006, including to workers who have left the job in the interim.

The workers allege that the beedi companies are supplying inferior quality tobacco and want them to produce 2,200 beedis from one kilogram of leaves which normally yields only 1,900 to 2,000 cigarettes. Employees are being forced to make up the cost of any shortfall.

Sacked Pakistan government employees demand reinstatement

Former employees of the National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) demonstrated outside the Peshawar Press Club in Pakistan on August 1. Protestors said that the government’s decision to terminate around 80,000 employees condemned thousands of families to extreme economic hardship.

The protestors demanded the government absorb the displaced

personnel into other departments and threatened national protests if they were not reinstated by August 10. The NCHD was established in March 2002 to oversee global resources for human development.

Nepal plantation workers end protest

Production at the Gurash Tea Estate, Kuwabashi Tea Plantation and Joon Tea Garden resumed on August 2 after a three-week industrial campaign by employees. The estates are located around Dhankuta, a hill town in eastern Nepal.

The workers are demanding a wage increase, permanent employment and medical insurance. They returned to work “under protest” but there is no news on whether the issues that sparked the dispute have been resolved.

More strike action by Vietnam factory workers

Thousands of minimum wage workers continue to strike in Vietnam for pay increases to compensate for the rising cost of living. Inflation has surged a staggering 27 percent over the last twelve months.

On August 1, 5,000 factory workers at the Kingmaker footwear plant in the jointly operated Vietnam-Singapore industrial zone in Binh Doung Province near Ho Chi Minh City went on strike. They want a wage increase plus an improvement in the quality of lunches provided at the factory canteen. The workers are currently paid about 1 million dong (\$US60) a month. More than 1,000 workers at a South Korean factory in Long An Province remain on strike after walking out on July 30 over pay and working conditions.

Fuel prices in Vietnam have increased 31 percent pushing up taxi fares in Ho Chi Minh City by 25 percent and forcing fishermen to keep their boats docked. Government employees, whose minimum monthly wage is just at 540,000 dong, are also facing increasing hardship.

Philippines footwear workers strike over conditions

Workers at Blue Star Manufacturing and Marketing (BMCC), which produces Advan-branded footwear, went on strike on August 6. The workers, mainly women who have accused management of sexual harassment and of union busting, picketed the factory located in the RMT Industrial Complex in Barangay Tunasan.

Blue Star Workers’ Union members want reinstatement of 50 union members sacked on July 24. They believe that the sackings were to disrupt a certification vote for the union to negotiate on their behalf. The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) is currently assessing unfair dismissal charges filed by the union.

Thai garment workers protest sacking of union official

Around 4,000 garment workers from the Body Fashion Thailand Company in the Bang Phli industrial estate Samut Prakin demonstrated at the factory on August 4. They were protesting the sacking of union official Jitra Kongdej who was dismissed on July 8 after appearing on the TV show Krong Sathanagarn (Situation Filtering) wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan "Not standing is no crime. One who thinks differently is not a criminal". The slogan relates to the arrest of anyone refusing to rise when the royal anthem is played in cinemas.

Body Fashion Thailand, which manufactures underwear and swimwear for Triumph, sacked the official after the Labour Court ruled it had suffered "damage to its reputation and business" because of her actions.

Around 800 workers also rallied at the company's offices in Bangkok demanding her immediate reinstatement but the company continually played the national anthem through loud-speakers to drown out protestors' speeches.

Indonesian rural workers accept minimum wage rise

On July 29, workers in East Kalimantan, Indonesia ended a week of rolling strikes, rallies and pickets after the governor signed a decree to lift the regional minimum wage by 9.16 percent back-dated to January 2008.

The industrial campaign, involving 10,000 members of the Indonesian Wood Forestry and General Workers Union, began on July 24 after negotiations with the Employers Association to lift minimum monthly pay from 815,000 rupiah (\$US88) to 1.3 million rupiah became deadlocked. The governor intervened after strikes forced the closure of PT Kalamur, PT Melapi, PT Tirta Mahakam and other large forestry and plywood companies in Samarinda.

NT teachers strike for pay rise

Public school teachers in the Northern Territory walked off the job for four hours on August 7 with around 150 Australian Education Union members demonstrating outside the electoral office of Labor's chief minister Paul Henderson. The teachers want a 20 percent pay increase over three years but the Labor government is offering only 12 percent.

Henderson condemned the union for continuing its wages campaign in the lead-up to the NT election on August 9 and claimed that Labor had given a commitment that if returned to power it "would continue to negotiate in good faith". He did not say, however, whether the government was prepared to improve its current pay offer.

A union spokesperson told the media that election time promises "are worth very little because we've had promises since 2001 from the Labor Party, many of which have never been fulfilled".

South Australian teachers continue rolling strikes

State school teachers in South Australia will continue half-day rolling strikes in support of a 21 percent pay increase over four years. Striking teachers in Adelaide's north protested outside Labor state premier Mike Rann's office on August 5 after he flatly rejected their pay claim. Rann contemptuously described the teachers wage demand as "totally unaffordable". "It's the Magic Pudding meets the Wizard of Oz," he said, and claimed it would "blow the state budget".

The government has set a pay ceiling on public sector pay increases in 2008-09 of 4.4 percent per annum, a figure below the current inflation rate. Teachers in schools in Adelaide's south began walkouts on August 7.

Tasmanian public servants impose more bans

An ongoing pay dispute involving 10,000 public servants in Tasmania escalated on August 6 with the imposition of 16 more work bans in hospitals, police stations and prisons. Members of the Community and Public Sector and Health and Community Services unions want pay parity with their interstate counterparts.

Bans on unpaid overtime and remaining at work-stations during scheduled breaks have been in place since April. The new bans include limits on answering phones, on processing mail in forensic science sites and at some police stations, restrictions on processing invoices for some health services and a ban on running the Sexual Offenders Program at Risdon Prison. The industrial action will also affect Medicare billing and aged pensioners who will not be charged for certificates in the Births, Deaths and Marriages office. National parks officers are refusing check visitors' passes.

State Labor Premier David Bartlett has threatened to stand down workers without pay if they continue industrial action.

New Zealand casino workers strike over wages

On August 2, around 1,300 kitchen and cleaning workers at the SkyCity Hotel in Auckland, New Zealand walked off the job for 24 hours and marched through city streets. Service and Food Workers Union and Unite members are demanding a pay rise of 10 percent over two years.

They are also seeking recognition for long service. Employees with 10 years service are paid the same hourly rate as new recruits of just \$NZ12.81 (\$US9.78). Management is refusing to lift its last offer of 7.5 percent over two years. To counter the strike action, SkyCity called in non-union workers to work double shifts and cancelled all leave. The union has threatened to begin fortnightly walk-outs and daily shift strikes if the company does not increase its current offer.

Fiji airport workers to strike

The Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) covering 200 workers employed at Airports Fiji Limited announced on July 29 it had issued a strike notice with the Ministry of Labour. The workers will strike on August 29 and members of the Air Traffic Union have agreed to walk out with them.

A FPSA spokesman said the strike was over a number of issues, including a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), retirement benefits and salaries arrears. He said there are 40 disputed issues currently registered with the Labour Ministry and that many went back four years.



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